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POISONS AND POISONING AMONG THE ROMANS

By DAVID B. KAUFMAN

POISONS and poisoning are frequently mentioned in Roman literature. The question whether the murder-rate and the percentage of suicides were greater than they are today is still debatable and cannot be decided with any degree of accuracy. Scholars cannot even agree on the size of the population of Rome itself at any given period, in spite of much research and many deductions. Much less can the death-rates from unnatural causes be determined. However, the crime of poisoning seems to have been much more frequent in ancient than in modern times. Perhaps this can be attributed to the absence of gunpowder and bullets.

The word *venenum* is derived, according to Walde,¹ from *Venus* and means a love potion. It has three meanings from actual usage: remedy,² poison,³ and magic drug or abortive.⁴ The exact meaning is frequently determined by the qualifying adjective *bonum* or *malum*.⁵ *Veneficium* means poisoning⁶ and practicing sorcery,⁷ while *veneficus* or *venefica* was applied to a poisoner⁸ or maker of drugs.⁹ However, in this paper we are primarily concerned with poisoning.

The first known instance of the crime of poisoning at Rome was in 331 B.C., when a high mortality, the result, probably, of a pestilence, was attributed to poisoning. Even Livy doubted the validity of the charges, but he¹⁰ gives the whole account as found in his sources. After many leading citizens had died from the same disease, a slave-girl gave information to the *curule aediles* that the reason for this high mortality was the poisons prepared and administered by the Roman matrons.

¹ A. Walde, *Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*² (Heidelberg: Winter, 1910), s.v.

² Pliny *NH* xxv. 128.

³ *Ibid.* 24.

⁴ Lucan vi. 681-84.

⁵ Cicero *Pro Cluentio* 148; *Digest* l. 16. 236.

⁶ Pliny *op. cit.* xxviii. 47.

⁷ Cicero *Brutus* 217; Pliny *op. cit.* xviii. 41; xxviii. 59; Tacitus *Annales* iv. 22.

⁸ Quintilian vii. 8. 2; ix 2. 105.

⁹ Seneca *De beneficiis* v. 13. 4.

¹⁰ viii. 18; Valerius Maximus ii. 5. 3.

On investigation they found about twenty matrons, including patrician ladies, in the act of brewing poisons, which they declared were salutary. On being forced to drink their own concoctions to prove the charges false, they perished by their own wickedness. Following this, a hundred and seventy more were found guilty of the same offense. The second case of extensive poisoning is found in 186 B.C. in connection with the licentious worship of Bacchus.¹ After a careful and extensive investigation of four months, carried on throughout Italy, the praetor Quintus Naevius made a grand exposé resulting in the condemnation of two thousand persons. Poisoning was one of the crimes prominently mentioned with the rest.

Four years later, the ravages of a pestilence brought another investigation into cases of poisoning at Rome and throughout Italy.² A number of magistrates, including a consul, and many illustrious men of all ranks had died. The praetors were charged, by order of the senate, to investigate the rumors. Hostilia, the wife of the consul, was suspected of having plotted this outrage, to elevate a son by a former marriage to the consulship. She was condemned on circumstantial evidence, and, with her, three thousand were put to death. We see that women were most addicted to poisoning, but it seems not improbable that this charge was frequently brought against them without sufficient evidence of their guilt, like that of witchcraft in Europe in the Middle Ages. They were condemned to death for this crime in seasons of pestilence, when the popular mind is always in an excited state and ready to attribute the calamities which they suffer to the arts of evil-disposed persons. We should remember also that the complete lack of chemical analysis made the charge of poisoning impossible of testing. On the other hand, they had a different code of morals and one less rigid than our own, which together with the fact that the relative size of their criminal class was possibly comparable with our own lends validity to the frequency of the charges of poisoning.

In 154 B.C. two former consuls were poisoned by their wives.³ Cases of poisoning seem to have multiplied rapidly from this time forth.⁴ In Quintilian's⁵ day the word "adulteress" was considered

¹ Livy xxxix. 8-19 and 41.

⁴ Plutarch *Cato Major* ix. 7.

² *Ibid.* xl. 37 and 43.

⁵ v. 11. 39.

³ Livy *Epitoma* 48.

synonymous with that of "poisoner," but even two centuries earlier Marcus Cato asserted that every adulteress was a poisoner. Cicero¹ mentioned some *venefici* among Catiline's friends. Catiline was also accused of having poisoned his son because Aurelia Orestilla hesitated to marry him as long as a stepson stood in the way.² In the *Philippics*³ Cicero alludes to a friend of Antony, who had given his nephew poison. Wife-poisoning seems to have been common.⁴ Cicero had several cases dealing with persons accused of having administered such drugs.⁵ The speech in behalf of Cluentius supplies us with a number of details on the subject. The younger Oppianicus accused Cluentius of poisoning, but Cicero's speech was mainly concerned with the earlier prosecution by Cluentius of the father of the present prosecutor, and in it he made some startling disclosures showing that the elder Oppianicus was really a villain and a poisoner. His victims were his own wife, Cluentia,⁶ his brother's wife, Auria, killed in pregnancy to prevent her bearing a child who would bar his inheritance of his brother's property,⁷ and his brother.⁸ This same man, through intermediaries, tried to bribe the slave of the physician attending Cluentius to poison him.⁹ Cicero, in this speech, also mentions, by way of parallel, the case of a certain woman of Miletus, who in pregnancy had accepted a bribe from the alternative heirs and procured her own abortion by drugs.¹⁰

In the early Empire, this crime must have been very frequent at Rome among all classes of society, to procure an inheritance,¹¹ to eliminate a husband¹² or stepson,¹³ or to rid one of his enemies,¹⁴ all of which was lamented by Juvenal and Tacitus and their contemporaries. Juvenal¹⁵ adds: "If you want to be anybody nowadays, you must dare

¹ *In Catilinam* ii. 4. 7.

² Sallust *Bellum Catilinae* 15; Valerius Maximus ix. 1. 9.

³ xi. 6. 13.

⁴ Pliny *op. cit.* xxvii. 4; Martial iv. 69.

⁵ *Pro Coelio* xiii. 30; *Pro Cluentio* 10.

⁶ 30.

⁷ 31.

⁸ 31.

⁹ 47.

¹⁰ 32.

¹¹ Seneca *Epistulae* cxix. 6; Juvenal i. 158; xiv. 173 and 250.

¹² Seneca *Epistulae* cxix. 6; Martial iv. 69; Juvenal i. 69-70.

¹³ Juvenal vi. 133-34 and 628.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* xiii. 25.

¹⁵ i. 73-76 (Loeb trans.).

some crime that merits narrow Gyara or a gaol; honesty is praised and starves. It is to their crimes that men owe their pleasure-grounds and high commands, their fine tables and old silver goblets with goats standing out in relief." We learn, from the same author, of mothers deliberately poisoning their own children, for no particular reason, and even showing defiance when apprehended.¹ The most deplorable thing of all is the fact that the women, supposedly the weaker sex, killed for hire.² Of course, among the male sex professional killers were common.³ Juvenal⁴ mentions the case of a woman who stabbed her husband, after poisons proved ineffective, since the husband, anticipating her attempt, had secured himself against poison by prophylactics. Juvenal⁵ also advises a father to take an antidote before dinner because his son is praying for his death which has been postponed so long. Nonius Asprenas, a close friend of Augustus, was accused of poisoning one hundred and thirty guests.⁶

Poison played a prominent part at the imperial court. Tiberius' son, Drusus, was reported to have been poisoned by his wife and Sejanus,⁷ and Claudius by his wife Agrippina.⁸ In the reign of Tiberius, Piso was accused of killing Germanicus with poison.⁹ Agrippina, wife of Germanicus, even feared to taste any fruit which Tiberius handed her at dinner.¹⁰ Murder in the same fashion was committed or attempted by the following emperors: Caligula,¹¹ Nero,¹² Vitellius,¹³ Domitian,¹⁴ Commodus,¹⁵ Caracalla,¹⁶ and Elagabalus.¹⁷ Caligula left a large trunk full of poisons.¹⁸ Suetonius informs us that Nero, the arch-poisoner, ordered that Britannicus, Claudius' son, be poisoned;

¹ Juvenal vi. 638-42.

⁴ vi. 659-61.

² *Ibid.* 646.

⁵ xiv. 250-54.

³ *Ibid.* xiii. 25.

⁶ Pliny *op. cit.* xxxv. 164; Suetonius *Augustus* 56.

⁷ Tacitus *Annales* iv. 8; Suetonius *Tiberius* 62; Dio Cassius lvii. 22.

⁸ Juvenal vi. 620; Tacitus *Annales* xii. 66-67; Suetonius *Claudius* 44; *Nero* 33.

⁹ Tacitus *Annales* ii. 69-74; iii. 12-15.

¹⁰ Suetonius *Tiberius* 53.

¹¹ Dio Cassius lix. 14.

¹² Tacitus *Annales* xiv. 3 and 65; xv. 60; Suetonius *Nero* 34; Dio Cassius lxix. 2-3.

¹³ Suetonius 14.

¹⁶ Spartianus *Caracalla* 3.

¹⁴ Tacitus *Agricola* 43.

¹⁷ Lampridius *Heliogabalus* 13.

¹⁵ Lampridius *Commodus* 9.

¹⁸ Suetonius 49.

thrice he attempted the life of his mother, Agrippina, but found her fortified by antidotes; his aunt, Domitia, he did poison for her estate; according to the same author, he sent poison to Burrus, praetorian prefect, in place of throat medicine which he had promised him; the children of Piso's confederates, and Nero's own freedmen who had aided him to the throne, were included among the Emperor's poisoned victims.¹ He even planned to poison the entire senate at banquets.²

Poisoning became so common that those who were in enviable positions of wealth and influence could not take any food or drink with definite assurance of safety. Consequently, tasters, *praegustatores*, who were slaves or freedmen, were secured for the emperors' tables.³ In fact, they became so common that they formed a *collegium* with a *procurator praegustatorum*.⁴ According to one account, Claudius was poisoned by his *praegustator*, the eunuch Halotus.⁵ Pliny⁶ tells us that, before the battle of Actium, Antony distrusted Cleopatra to such an extent that he refused to touch any food set before him unless another person had tasted it first. Students even took to writing compositions on "The Poisoner."⁷ Adgandestrius, chief of the Chatti, sent a note to the Roman senate, promising the death of Arminius, if poison were sent from Rome for the perpetration of the crime.⁸

Poison was also commonly employed throughout Roman times for suicidal purposes. Livy⁹ tells us that, before the surrender of Capua to the Romans, twenty-seven Campanian senators took poison to save their bodies from torture, their minds from insult, their eyes and ears from the sight and hearing of all the cruelties and indignities that await the conquered. When Masinissa found himself in difficulty with the Romans for having married Sophonisba, the wife of the conquered chieftain, Syphax, he sent her a cup of poison which he requested her to take in order that she might not fall into the hands of the Romans.

¹ *Ibid.* 33-36.

² *Ibid.* 43.

³ Tacitus *Annales* xii. 66; *CIL*, VI, 602, 1956.

⁴ *CIL*, VI, 602, 1956, 5355, 9003-5.

⁵ Suetonius 44.

⁶ *Op. cit.* xxi. 12.

⁷ Quintilian *Declamatio* xvii. 11; Juvenal vii. 169.

⁸ Tacitus *Annales* ii. 88.

⁹ xxvi. 13-14.

Livy¹ adds that it was the custom of kings to keep poison in stock, against the uncertainties of fortune. Hadrian compelled Servianus to kill himself, on the ground that he aspired to the throne.² Pliny³ says that many persons have ended their lives with poison, especially if an incurable malady has rendered existence intolerable. The most excruciating pains, according to this author,⁴ are those attendant upon strangury, those arising from maladies of the stomach, and those caused by disorders of the head; it was more generally in these cases that patients were tempted to commit suicide. Elagabalus had poisons at hand with which to kill himself, if need arose, since it had been prophesied that he would die a violent death.⁵

Tacitus gives us numerous instances of prisoners or accused taking or being administered poison. When Martina, a notorious dealer in poisons, was held under suspicion for the murder of Germanicus and sent to Rome, she died suddenly, supposedly of poison taken to avoid any disclosures.⁶ When Vibulenus Agrippa was tried before the senate, in the reign of Tiberius, he swallowed poison which he had concealed under his robe, and instantly expired.⁷ When Seneca, after opening his veins, found death slow, he requested a friend to give him poison that was usually given, at Athens, to the criminals condemned to die.⁸

Let us turn our attention to the poisons and their effects. Possibly the most familiar is hemlock (*cicuta*).⁹ Lucretius¹⁰ makes a statement that goats often fatten on hemlock which for man is rank poison. Pliny¹¹ says it is a plant whose seed is noxious, while the stalk is eaten by many people, either green or cooked. Its stem is smooth, often as much as three feet in height, and branching at the top. The leaves have a strong odor; the root is never used; the seeds and leaves possess refrigerating properties which are so fatal because they coagulate the blood. In diluted form it has beneficial qualities. The best antidote, provided it has not reached the bowels, is wine, says our author; but if it is taken in wine, it is irremediably fatal. The bodies of those

¹ xxx. 14-15.

² Spartianus *Hadrianus* 23.

³ *Op. cit.* xx. 199.

⁴ *Ibid.* xxv. 23.

⁹ Horace *Satires* ii. 1. 56; *Epistulae* i. 2. 53.

¹⁰ v. 897.

⁵ Lampridius *Heliogabalus* 33.

⁶ *Annales* iii. 7.

⁷ *Ibid.* vi. 40.

⁸ *Ibid.* xv. 64.

¹¹ *Op. cit.* xxv. 151-54.

poisoned by it are covered with spots. Hemlock was grown at Susa in Assyria, in Parthia, Laconia, Crete, Megara, and Attica.

Another poison was henbane (*hyoscyamos*),¹ found in four varieties. The oil extracted from the seed caused insanity, if injected into the ears, and, according to Pliny, even the leaves exercised a deleterious effect upon the mind. This plant was found in maritime regions. Aconite (*aconitum*) was commonly used at Rome.² It was the most prompt of all poisons in its effects.³ Aconite has leaves like a cucumber, never more than four; they are hairy and rise from near the root. It grew on bare rocks, especially in Pontus. Its odor kills mice at a considerable distance, so we are told. On the other hand, aconite is a useful ingredient, in composition, for the eyes, and, taken in mulled wine, neutralizes the venom of the scorpion. The ancients inform us that the hellebore (*elleborum* or *veratrum*),⁴ especially the black variety, kills animals but was much used by man as a purgative, a remedy for mental diseases, epilepsy, etc. It was found on high mountains. Pliny says that people who gather it should eat garlic and drink wine to avoid ill effects. Some famous men like Carneades and Chrysippus used it to sharpen their intellectual powers.

Pliny⁵ warns against mushrooms because the poisonous cannot always be distinguished from the non-poisonous. He asserts that any become noxious if they grow near a hobnail, a piece of rusty iron, a bit of rotten cloth, or a hole of a serpent, or if they are breathed upon by a serpent. Their medicinal uses, in his day, were for stomach ailments, freckles, and spots on women's faces, maladies of the eyes, ulcers, eruptions, and bites. Opium, made from the juice of the white poppy, was known to the Romans and was used by them in large doses for suicidal purposes. Small quantities were said to cause blindness, but, if mixed with other materials, it was considered beneficial for headache, earache, gout, and erysipelas.⁶ Thapsia⁷ was very poisonous but little used. It was so noxious that those who gathered the plant waxed their faces. The berries of the yew tree (*taxus*)⁸ were considered poisonous, and even the wood was thought to be so noxious

¹ *Ibid.* xxv. 35–37.

² Juvenal i. 158; viii. 219.

³ Pliny *op. cit.* xxvii. 4–10.

⁴ *Ibid.* xxv. 47–61.

⁵ *Ibid.* xxii. 92–99.

⁶ *Ibid.* xx. 198–203.

⁷ *Ibid.* xiii. 124–26.

⁸ *Ibid.* xvi. 50–51.

that it killed those who drank from vessels carved from it. Pliny adds that anyone who sleeps beneath a yew tree, or only takes food there, is sure to meet his death. Arrows may have been dipped into its juice to give them a poisonous coat. The same author claims that these poisonous qualities are entirely neutralized by driving a copper nail into the wood of the tree.

One of the varieties of nightshade (*strychnos* or *trychnos*)¹ was supposed to cause insanity if only a few drops were taken, and instant death from larger quantities. Weapons that were used in battle were poisoned with it. The Greeks maintained that it was productive of delusive and prurient fancies and of vain, fantastic visions. Its antidote was mulled wine. When placed near an asp, it was said to cause torpor in the serpent. It is to be noted that all the poisons which have been mentioned so far are vegetable products.

The Spanish fly (*cantharis*) was poisonous, we are told, when taken internally, causing excruciating pain in the bladder, but, applied externally, was beneficial.² *Buprestis*³ was an insect rarely found in Italy. When eaten by cattle, it was reputed to cause such expansion of the gall that the animal burst asunder, but was beneficial to man, when employed externally. A nitrate (*nitrum*) was used as an emetic, in cases where *buprestis* had been swallowed, and as an antidote against bull's blood.⁴ The scorpion⁵ is also mentioned. We are told that a slice of toad's (*rubeta*) lung or its blood caused death.⁶ Pliny⁷ mentions several sea fish which are considered poisonous: *lepus*, *araneus*, and *trygon*. Several species of venomous reptiles were known in antiquity: *vipera*,⁸ *aspis*,⁹ and *dipsas*.¹⁰ The salamander was considered the most venomous reptile and able to wipe out whole nations at one time. If it crawls up a tree, says Pliny,¹¹ it infects all the fruit and kills those who eat thereof. If it only touches with its foot the wood upon which bread is baked, or falls into a well, the same fatal effects ensue. If its saliva touches any part of the body, the hair falls

¹ *Ibid.* xxi. 177–82.

² *Ibid.* xxix. 93–96.

³ *Ibid.* xxx. 30.

⁴ *Ibid.* xxxi. 119–20.

⁵ *Ibid.* xi. 163–64; xxviii. 24.

⁶ Juvenal i. 70; vi. 659.

⁷ *Op. cit.* ix. 155.

⁸ Suetonius *Claudius* 16.

⁹ Lucan ix. 610–14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Op. cit.* xxix. 74–86.

off from the entire body. Bull's blood, taken fresh, was ranked as a poison, while that of a he-goat was considered so powerful that it was preferred above everything else for sharpening iron implements, if we can believe Pliny.¹ Viper's blood was also listed as a poison.²

Mineral poisons were relatively unknown to the Romans although they knew of the deleterious effect of gypsum (*gypsum*), white lead (*cerussa*), sulphur or sulphates (*sulphur*), and quicksilver (*argentum vivum*).³ The waters of several fountains in Thessaly, Arcadia, and Macedonia were fatal.⁴ According to one account, Alexander the Great perished from water secured from a spring in Macedonia which was well known for its poisonous properties.⁵ On the other hand, some wells were deliberately poisoned.⁶ Venomous substances of myth and fable could be cited but shall not be treated of here; some of the poisons listed above may probably come under the same category.

Poisons were administered in a number of ways. The easiest was to mix them in the wine which one drank.⁷ Concealing them in food was another means: Juvenal⁸ mentions the danger of eating hot cakes; Agrippina was supposed to have served Claudius with a drug in his mushrooms;⁹ Commodus murdered the praetorian prefect with figs treated with poison.¹⁰ Cicero¹¹ says it was difficult and unusual to administer poison in bread, and in such a combination the poison did not take effect as quickly as when mixed in wine, although detection was easier. Dio¹² mentions a very ingenious device. He says many persons died without knowing the cause, murdered by someone who pricked them with needles smeared with poison. Horace¹³ mentions mixing hemlock with honey. Perhaps the most ingenious method was that used by Cleopatra.¹⁴ When Antony became very suspicious of her before the battle of Actium, she dipped the tips of the flowers of her chaplet into poison and during the banquet dropped the chaplet into

¹ *Ibid.* xi. 221-23; xxviii. 147-48.

² Horace *Epodes* iii. 6.

³ Pliny *op. cit.* xxviii. 129.

⁴ Q. Curtius Rufus x. 10; Seneca *Naturales quaestiones* iii. 25. 1-2; Pliny *op. cit.* ii. 231; Plutarch *Alexander* 77.

⁵ Q. Curtius Rufus x. 10.

¹⁰ Lampridius *Commodus* 9.

⁶ Seneca *De Ira* ii. 9. 3.

¹¹ *Pro Cluentio* 173.

⁷ Juvenal i. 69-70; vi. 633.

¹² lxvii. 11. 6.

⁸ vi. 631.

¹³ *Satires* ii. 1. 56.

⁹ Suetonius 44.

¹⁴ Pliny *op. cit.* xxi. 12.

the wine which he was about to drink, thus showing how adept she was in poisoning.

A number of antidotes¹ were known: asses' milk for mineral poisoning, cows' milk for hemlock, any kind of milk for *cantharides*, *buprestis*, and the salamander. Wine was the best general remedy² for vegetable poisoning, and for bites and stings. Some poisons were slow in acting,³ others rapid;⁴ some caused one to become speechless until death ensued.⁵ Some bodies became black or livid after death.⁶ Dio⁷ tells the story of how Nero had the body of Germanicus whitened with gypsum, after it had turned black from the poison administered by him. But it as was being carried through the Forum, a heavy rain which fell while the gypsum was still moist washed it off, so that the crime was known to everyone.

A number of persons were well versed in poisons. Attalus III occupied his spare moments with raising poisonous plants and studying their characteristics.⁸ Mithradates had done a great deal on the subject of antidotes⁹ and was always prepared against poisoning by taking prophylactics.¹⁰ A number of women who excelled in the art gained great notoriety and had their hands in many murders: among them were Canidia,¹¹ Locusta,¹² and Martina.¹³ Some gained great wealth, and Nero even placed pupils under Locusta to be instructed in the art, after she had been so successful in eliminating Britannicus.¹⁴ This same woman had been condemned to death but was saved to serve the leaders of state in their murderous practices.¹⁵ After Apollodorus, a rhetorician of Pergamus, was convicted of being a poisoner, he went to Massilia and opened a school there. He had been defended by Asinius Pollio in one of the three trials for poisoning under Augustus, in all of which Pollio served as defense counsel.¹⁶ We know of physicians who

¹ *Ibid.* xxviii. 128-29.

⁷ *Ixi.* 7. 4.

² *Ibid.* xxiii. 43.

⁸ Plutarch *Demetrius* xx. 2.

³ Suetonius *Claudius* 44.

⁹ Pliny *op. cit.* xxv. 62-63.

⁴ Pliny *op. cit.* xxi. 12.

¹⁰ Juvenal vi. 661.

⁵ Suetonius *Claudius* 44.

¹¹ Horace *Epodes* iii. 8.

⁶ Juvenal i. 72.

¹² Juvenal i. 71; Tacitus *Annales* xii. 66; Suetonius *Nero* 33.

¹³ Tacitus *Annales* ii. 74; iii. 7.

¹⁴ Suetonius *Nero* 33.

¹⁵ Tacitus *Annales* xii. 66; xiii. 15; Suetonius *Nero* 33.

¹⁶ Seneca *Controversia* ii. 13. 13; Porphyrio *Horati epistulae* i. 5. 9.

practiced this art and became notorious through it.¹ By the oath of Hippocrates, physicians swore never to administer a poison to anyone when asked to do so, or to suggest such a course, or to give an abortive. The disdain in which poisoners were held is evidenced by the fact that the word *veneficus* or *venefica* was an insult.²

Let us look at the legal side of the question and see the penalties meted out. As early as the time of the Twelve Tables special disposition was made of cases involving murder by poison.³ Polybius⁴ gives evidence of the seriousness of the crime by classing it with treason, conspiracy, and assassination, all of which, he says, are under the jurisdiction of the senate. The first legislative enactment especially directed against poisoning was a law of the dictator Sulla, *Lex Cornelia de sicariis et veneficis*, passed in 82 B.C., which continued in force, with some alterations, to the latest times.⁵ It struck not only at the poisoner but also at those who prepared, sold, possessed, or bought poison for effecting the death of someone. By a *senatusconsultum* passed subsequently, a female who gave drugs or poison for the purpose of removing sterility, even without any evil intent, was banished, if the person to whom she administered them died in consequence.⁶ Another *senatusconsultum* brought druggists (*pigmentarii*) under the same limitations, and made them liable to the penalties of this law, if they administered love-philtres.⁷ From the *Digest* we learn that the punishment fixed by this law was the *deportatio in insulam* and the confiscation of property for those of higher station (*altiores*); those of lower rank (*humiliores*) were thrown to the wild beasts.⁸ We have no definite information about the penalty imposed in the time of the Republic, but it probably was the *interdictio aquae et ignis*, since the *deportatio* under the emperors took the place of the *interdictio*, and the expression in the *Digest* was suited to the time of the compilers.

Let me conclude by quoting Pliny:

. . . . It is out of compassion to us that she <the earth> has ordained certain substances to be poisonous, in order that when we are weary of life, hunger, a mode of death the most foreign to the kind disposition of the earth,

¹ Apuleius *Metamorphosis* x. 11 and 25-26.

² Plautus *Truculentus* 762.

³ *Digest* l. 16. 236.

⁴ vi. 13. 4.

⁵ Cicero *Pro Cluentio* 148; *Digest* xlviii. 8. 3.

⁶ *Digest* xlviii. 8. 3. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.* 3.

⁸ *Ibid.* 5.

might not consume us by a slow decay, that precipices might not lacerate our mangled bodies, that the unseemly punishment of the halter may not torture us, by stopping the breath of one who seeks his own destruction, or that we may not seek our death in the ocean, and become food for our graves, or that our bodies may not be gashed by steel. On this account it is that nature has produced a substance which is very easily taken, and by which life is extinguished, the body remaining undefiled and retaining all its blood, and only causing a degree of thirst. And when it is destroyed by this means, neither bird nor beast will touch the body, but he who has perished by his own hands is reserved for the earth.¹

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¹ *Op. cit.* (Bohn trans.) ii. 156.